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Robert Stethem's killers

WILLIAM RUSHER

Somewhere in the Middle East, under the protection of Syria or Libya or perhaps simply hidden by their relatives and friends, are the three men who last June hijacked TWA flight 847. Their names are: Mohammed Hammadei, Ali Atwa, and Hassan Izz-al-Din. On June 15 at the Beirut airport, in the course of that hijacking, they put a gun to the head of Robert Stethem, 23, and blew him away, for the crime of being a member of the U.S. Navy.

Outrage over the killing was widespread in the United States, and nowhere more so than among the Reagan administration's most staunchly conservative supporters. There were ill-considered demands for instant and bloody reprisal, not against the killers (they hadn't even been identified yet), but against loosely described groups alleged to be supporting them: "the terrorist camps in the Bekaa Valley," etc.

Aside from relieving the frustrations of their proponents, these spastic yelps for revenge served little purpose save to demonstrate how difficult it was to devise and execute a practical plan for reprisal.

The individuals and organizations that actually sponsored the hijacking and supported the hijackers are difficult, perhaps impossible, to identify. It is certainly far from clear

that they are, or ever were, based in specific camps in the Bekaa Valley or anywhere else. And the indiscriminate bombardment of Lebanese villages, on no better ground than that their inhabitants are Arabs, would merely shock and outrage the whole Middle East, damaging America's interests still further.

Some conservatives, therefore, counseled patience when the Reagan administration made it clear that it would not go along with such rash proposals. Revenge, we reminded the hotheads, is a dish best eaten cold. There was no real need for hurry: there would be time to identify the actual killers, locate their hideouts, and arrange for their extermination. Some of us — I, for one — were prepared to go a step further; if the three killers proved permanently beyond our reach, it should be possible to bring about the death of enough of their blood relatives and close friends to make the murderers regret their crime, and also to generate heavy communal pressures against further such conduct. (This, apparently, was what the Russians did when four of their people were kidnapped and one of them was killed, and it swiftly resulted in the release of the remaining three.)

President Reagan, however, decided against such indirect retaliation, feeling — perhaps rightly — that it would lower us to the hijackers' own level of indiscriminate slaughter, and that this would not be acceptable to the American people. Guilt, he insisted, is personal, and so must punishment be.

Very well; but more than eight months have passed, and although our intelligence facilities have identified the killers, all three remain at large. Some observers are con-

vinced that the matter is being allowed to slide slowly toward a back burner, where it can simmer indefinitely.

But the murderers of Robert Stethem are in a different category than America's other terrorist foes in the Middle East. The drivers of the explosive-laden vehicles that destroyed the Marine barracks and our embassy annex in Beirut gave their own lives to ensure the success of their missions. The hijackers of the *Achille Lauro*, who cold-bloodedly killed Leon Klinghoffer, are — thanks to Mr. Reagan's prompt intervention when an Egyptian airliner tried to fly them to sanctuary in Tunisia — in an Italian prison, awaiting trial.

Mr. Stethem's killers are known, but in hiding. Surely enough money, scattered around the Middle East, could locate them. If and when it does, it will of course be splendid if they can be kidnapped a la Eichmann and brought to this country for trial; but it is not essential.

What is essential — absolutely essential — is: they must die.

William Rusher, publisher of National Review, is a nationally syndicated columnist.